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SUBJECT: KING ABDULLAH AND FOREIGN MINISTER PRESS COMMENTS
-- IMAGE BUILDING?

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[1](#)B. B) RIYADH 06520

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Michael Gfoeller for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S) SUMMARY. Recent statements to the press by Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah and Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal appear to be a concerted effort by the SAG to address strong public criticism of its position on the Lebanon crisis and ties to the U.S., as well as accusations that the SAG has aligned with the U.S. at the expense of its Arab identity. An August 26 Asharq Al-Awsat interview with King Abdullah and complementary statements by Al-Faisal at a subsequent press conference the same day emphasized Arab unity, the SAG's leadership in forging peace in the Middle East, and the need to revitalize the Arab League as a proactive body. There was little public reaction to the King's and Al-Faisal's statements, which were followed by the King's announcement at the weekly meeting of the Council of Ministers that the KSA would take a leading role in seeking solutions to recent crises in the region and protecting it from "ambitious parties." END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) In a rare news interview on August 26 with the Saudi-owned Arabic daily Asharq Al-Awsat, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah conveyed his disappointment regarding what he described as the "faltering" Middle East peace process, while emphasizing the SAG's support for the people of Lebanon. Although, as is usually the case, no transcript of the interview in its entirety was made available, the press published selected statements that covered a range of topics, including foreign investment, education, and the price of oil. The interview, however, appeared to focus primarily on regional issues, including the crises in Iraq and Lebanon, as well as the SAG's foreign policy.

[1](#)3. (U) According to Asharq Al-Awsat, King Abdullah is seeking a "new, but concrete and applicable, plan for peace in the Middle East." It reported that the King pointed to a lack of understanding by the "big powers" of the problems faced by Arab and Islamic countries and decried the absence of a "regional and international vision for protecting the region's security." Asharq Al-Awsat also reported that King Abdullah denied that recent trips to China, India, Pakistan, and Turkey were to "send messages to some countries against others." The trips did not reflect a shift in foreign policy, said the King, but rather served the interests of Saudi Arabia.

4.(C) Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal further clarified the SAG's position in a press conference the same

day, noting that it has become unclear to people in the region what their interests are after what he described as the failure of their governments to adequately deal with the region's challenges. He cautioned some governments against forging relationships at the expense of "inter-Arab relationships," and emphasized that Arab leaders must work together to "regain the confidence of our people." (NOTE: Some local Saudi contacts suggested that these particular comments were a less-than-subtle rebuke to Syria for its relationship with Iran. END NOTE.) He called upon all Arab countries to rise up to the expectations of their people - a clear reflection of King Abdullah's statement in the Asharq Al-Awsat interview that "we draw our strength from our people." Al-Faisal also noted that Saudi Arabia is striving to build strong Arab relationships based on the principles of joint efforts and supported the Arab League -- although he was clear that this body needs to reassess its basic role and determine how to be most effective in the current environment.

15. (U) Despite the storm of criticism generated within the Saudi public by the Lebanon crisis, there was little public reaction to the statements made by King Abdullah and Al-Faisal. Palestinian political analyst Azman Tamimi criticized the focus on Arab identity in a commentary on Al-Jazeera, claiming that Saudi Arabia's affiliation with a Muslim country such as Iran would not precipitate the loss of Arab identity, whereas an alliance with the U.S. would do so. However, an editorial in the August 29 edition of the Arab News strongly supported Al-Faisal's suggestion to revamp the Arab League. King Abdullah "closed the loop" at the weekly meeting of the Council of Ministers by announcing that the KSA would leverage its "significant role in the Arab and

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Islamic world" to seek solutions to the region's problems, and protect it from "ambitious parties."

COMMENT

16. (S) The Government often provides "nuggets" of information to the press to gauge and help manage public reaction to key issues. King Abdullah's interview with Asharq Al-Awsat, the Foreign Minister's complementary comments to the press, and the King's subsequent announcement to the Council of Ministers all appear to be a well-coordinated, concerted effort on the part of the SAG to stem the tide of negative public reaction to its position regarding Lebanon and its ties to the U.S. (reftels). Interestingly, Al-Faisal's message regarding Arab unity is very similar to the August 4 statement issued by 170 Muslim scholars regarding the need for Muslims to stand "shoulder to shoulder" with all peace-loving people (Ref B). The SAG's efforts to portray itself as the "center of Arabism" and the "window that can communicate with the world" seem to directly address recent criticism that the ruling family has aligned itself with the U.S. at the expense of its Muslim identity. The SAG, always sensitive to public criticism, is clearly taking steps to portray itself as a regional leader with unassailable loyalty to the Arab nation. END COMMENT.

GFOELLER